

# SOAS student faces week-long trial at the Old Bailey: Drop the terrorism charges against Sarah Cotte!

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Sarah Cottee, a 22-year-old SOAS University of London student, will appear at the Old Bailey on Monday, when lawyers will challenge the terrorism charges brought against their client more than two years ago.

Cotte's "crime" was speaking on campus to defend the Palestinian people's right to resist illegal occupation and genocide. The trial is expected to run all week.

Cottee was 19 when she addressed students on the steps of SOAS for the Fight Racism, Fight Imperialism student society in October 2023, opposing Israel's genocide in Gaza and upholding the right of the Palestinian people to armed self-defence.

Nearly three months later, on January 31, following complaints to police by Lawyers for Israel, a Zionist lobby group, Cotte was arrested by counter-terrorism police during a dawn raid on her home. She was charged in March 2024 with two counts of expressing support for a proscribed organisation (Hamas) under the Terrorism Act (2000).

A second SOAS student was arrested for the same offence in March 2024 but has not been charged. Together, they are known as the SOAS 2.

If found guilty, Cotte, a French citizen, faces a maximum sentence of 14 years' imprisonment. Israel's genocide in Gaza, backed by the British government, has killed more than 70,000 Palestinians, including over 21,000 children.

Cotte says the charges against her are not a "misuse" of the Terrorism Act but show its intended purpose: "It's really important that we oppose terrorism legislation as a whole, and not just speak of it being misused, because its very objective is to target anti-

imperialists, to target people who stand in solidarity with liberation movements. That's what it's there for."

Ahead of her trial, Sarah spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*, outlining the significance of her case. She explained, "There's potentially really large and quite dangerous consequences if I get a guilty verdict.

"First, on an individual level, Section 12 of the Terrorism Act carries a sentence of up to 14 years of prison time, which is no joke, and I'd rather not go to prison. And as a foreigner in this country, I also risk deportation, even if I get a suspended sentence and never even see the inside of a prison cell.

"Beyond that, for the movement as a whole, it has really clear implications for our right to free speech, our right to defend, in particular, the Palestinian resistance, and the right of occupied peoples to armed struggle against genocide. Because that's really what the government is putting on trial here. It's saying that if you support Palestinian resistance, you support terrorism."

Cotte explained, "When we speak of Palestinian resistance, we speak about the right of a people, of an occupied people, to fight back against genocide, against occupation, by whatever means available to them, which is the word in use in international law—international law that Britain is, in theory, supposed to respect.

"International law also says third-party nations have a responsibility to prevent crimes such as genocide. And obviously that's not been taken up at all by the British state.

"So we kind of want to use the opportunity to flip the script and put Britain, the British state, British

imperialism on trial in this situation.”

Sarah’s lawyers will present evidence from historians and other experts establishing the broad scope of Palestinian armed resistance to foreign occupation from the first decades of the 20th century. She explains, “The prosecution alleges [that] when you speak about Palestinian resistance, that’s a sort of covert way of speaking about Hamas without speaking about Hamas. And that’s a view which completely erases over 100 years of Palestinian resistance. Before Hamas ever even existed.

“What about the Great Arab Revolt of 1936-1939, the nationalist and very secular Palestinian resistance movement that you had in the 1950s and 60s, you know, with the PFLP [Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine], the DFLP [Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine], which are organisations which are still around today?

“And we know, as anti-imperialists, as communists, that actually, how can we support the Palestinian people without supporting the means that they choose to wage their liberation struggle? And as people living in imperialist Britain, it’s really not up to us to decide to judge and police what they decide to do to fight for freedom.”

Cottee’s hearing at London’s Central Criminal Court takes place amid a barrage of repression by the Starmer Labour government, backed by the highest levels of Britain’s judiciary, redefining protest and free speech against war and genocide as terrorism.

On Monday, the Court of Appeal upheld Home Secretary Yvette Cooper’s proscription of Palestine Action as a terrorist organisation, overturning a High Court ruling in February which found the ban unlawful and disproportionate.

On June 12, four members of Palestine Action were sentenced as terrorists for breaking into an Israeli weapons factory in Filton, England, where they damaged military equipment used to commit genocide in Gaza. The judge withheld from jurors that a guilty verdict would see the four young people sentenced as terrorists—a crime for which they were never tried.

Human rights barrister Michael Mansfield described their conviction as a “constitutional threat”. They will spend collectively 26 years in prison.

Centuries-old legal principles are falling, as the British ruling class prepares for escalating wars against

Russia, Iran, and ultimately China, and for the mass austerity and repression needed by the state to enforce deeply unpopular wars against the working class, while enriching Britain’s oligarchy.

Labour’s National Security (State Threats) Bill is being fast-tracked through the Commons, empowering Britain’s Home Secretary to criminalise state and non-state bodies (defined as proxies) for “foreign power threat activity”. This legal dragnet will be used to criminalise anyone associated with political, social and cultural organisations deemed a threat “to the UK or its interests”.

At this week’s hearing, supporters of Cotte will rally outside the Old Bailey. She will be joined by her parents, brother and sister, who have travelled from France. Since her arrest in January 2024, Sarah’s passport has remained confiscated by police, so she has been unable to travel home to France. Under the terms of her bail, Sarah cannot even cross the English border into Wales or Scotland.

“It’s limited my ability to go back home and to see my family, which is difficult to go through. I mean, you stay strong, and you stay true to your politics, and that keeps you going, but it takes a toll. So, I am quite excited to see my family. They don’t necessarily have the exact same politics as me, but they’re with me 100 percent.”

The Socialist Equality Party urges workers, youth and students to attend next week’s rallies outside the Old Bailey at 9:30 a.m. each day. The terrorism charges against Cotte and the supporters of Palestine Action must be dropped. The anti-terror laws aimed at criminalising protest must be repealed through the building of an international working-class movement against war, genocide and capitalism.



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